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Changing cultural values and attitudes towards the elderly create hardship and uncertainty. This field research report explores self-help, daily activities, and disappearing family support networks of the elderly in a Mexican rural town in the State of Queretaro.

Aging, Waning Family Support, and the Life of the Elderly in the Rural Community Villa Progreso, Queretaro, Mexico: Reflections, Testimonies, and Case Studies

Maria V. Gonzalez

Introduction

The profound transformation of the Mexican economy throughout the last few decades has brought substantial changes in traditional Mexican cultural practices. These changes are deeply affecting all aspects of the social and cultural lives of people and include some of the values that people have about how the elderly should be treated and viewed. This essay is about the aging, the activities of the elderly, and changing cultural values in rural Mexico towards the elderly as expressed in the community of Villa Progreso, in Central Mexico. Special emphasis is given in this report to the self-help, daily activities, and disappearing family support networks of the elderly.

During my stay in this community of the state of Queretaro in the summer of 2002, I studied how the elderly in Villa Progreso cope with everyday life and investigated on the resources available to them as a group. I also studied the participation in the organized elderly group known as *Demni* voice for *flower* in the local Otomi Language in Villa Progreso. The full name of the group is “*El grupo de la tercera edad Demni*” which translates into English as *The Group of the Third Age Demni*.

Villa Progreso is a small rural community of 4,650 inhabitants, with an

elderly population of 335. Elderly is considered 55 years and older. This study was conducted using ethnographic methods including participant observation, interviews, and genealogies. With the use of a recording device, I captured the actual voices of the elderly and their communities by conducting life histories and gathering testimonies about their relationships. I gain understanding on what aging means to them, particularly in terms of meeting the demands of their everyday life, on the building and maintaining of their relationships, and on creating new cultural spaces for the affirmation of the importance of life in its advanced stages.

Overview and Hypotheses

The traditional rural extended-family households of multiple generations and extended kinship relations is breaking down in Villa Progreso. As the community is required to seek an economic livelihood because of the impact of international economics and limited local resources, many *Progresistas* (natives of Villa Progreso) have begun to leave the community in search of employment. This mass movement of out-migration to the US and to other parts of Mexico (especially the cities) has created many households, though not all, in which the elderly live on their own and must be largely self-sufficient and reliant on the

other members of the same age group for companionship and assistance.

I organized my research experience in Mexico with the working hypothesis that the elderly in Villa Progreso are increasingly living in households, separate from their families and hence a in contradiction to the idealize image of family that the Mexican culture prescribes. In the ideal Mexican family, the elderly is taken care of as a continuing member of the household. The elderly in Villa Progreso are living in households separate from their families for a variety of reasons besides migration. In some instances the elder own their own homes and do not want to move-in with their children. In other instances the land parcels where their homes are located cannot accommodate the construction of new homes for their children. Many elderly have decided to remain in the community as their children have moved out. I have also noticed that there has been a rejection –unintended perhaps— of the idea that the elderly should live with their families. Perhaps the most probable and tangible reason is that the typical Mexican household, with large intergenerational families, is physically disappearing into the new economic milieu, where there is now value placed on materialistic and monetary gain rather than on the familism, human contact and support.

Personal Reflection

I am a first generation Mexican-American and I was raised in accord to the “traditional” model of believing that the needs of my family as a whole or other individual family members, such as the children or the elderly, should take priority over my own needs. Practically all of my life I have been a caregiver and

I have placed the needs of my nuclear family and extended family before my own. It is ironic, or perhaps predictable, how after only going to a university and reading about my culture, I finally notice my behavior. It has been so hard for me to put my own individual needs ahead of my families needs that I have at times felt like I have betrayed my own family. This feeling of disloyalty triggered my research on Mexican culture. To explore the idea proof that the Mexican culture was changing rapidly concerning traditional values and behaviors, especially concerning familial responsibilities toward one another, including the elderly. I decided to research the elderly, their lifestyle and their community in a rural setting in Mexico. To detach my self from my family and fulfill my need to conduct this ethnographic research project, in the summer of two thousand and one, I enrolled in an International Summer Program in Queretaro within the California State University of Monterey Bay. I traveled to Villa Progreso, Queretaro, Mexico along with our advisor Dr. Manuel Carlos and other students from the University. I really enjoyed this project and decided to again enroll in the summer of two thousand and two and I stayed there for another month in a half. I stayed with an elderly couple that attended ongoing elderly support group meetings. By becoming a participant observer and conducting ethnographic interviews with the elderly I found out that in deed the Mexican culture has changed and that the caring needs of the elderly have grown greater than before and beyond the ability which family can, or is in a position to provide.

Community of Villa Progreso

As I traveled to the rural village of Villa Progreso, I wondered how life would be from that of the life I had experienced in the United States. I wondered if things were really that different or if things were much of the same. I was anxious for answers and I knew that only by the time I would get there and actually live the life of the village that I would start to understand some of the answers I was searching for. As I arrived and settled in to life in Villa Progreso, I noticed the physical environment, the weather was hot and humid, lying still underneath the high dessert mountains that surround the village. Most of the streets were stone paved, that is covered with a carefully arranged rock layer locally known as *empedrado*. Some other are simply dirt streets while the main street was paved. As you enter the village through the main street, you come across the *plaza*, a social space, and a place for the old and the young to share.

Behind the plaza is the church and next to the church, the city hall. To the other side to the church there are different stores and shops: a flower shop, a wood shop, and a grocery store known locally as *miscelanea*. As a token of the far-reaching connection of the community, and behind the church, there is a *cyber café*, which is owned by a young couple. This place has computer terminal with Internet connection. You can usually see young adults and children using the lab. There is also a private doctors office, which many elderly go see when a health problem occurs and they happen to have the money for it. There are a few stores downtown, a bakery, a shoe store, a general hardware store, a grocery store, a meat market, a dairy store, a stationary store and another grocery *miscelanea* store. On the main street, there is a police station, a tortilla

shop *tortilleria*, and integral family development (DIF) building were many of the public services are offered. A ceramic shop, and a variety of grocery stores can be found around the village. The three grammar schools, two middle schools and one high school are also located all around the village. The people go on minding their own business, but they sure can tell when you are from out of town. While you walk through the village, you can see the generation gap that the economy has produced.

In my initial tour through the village, I saw many children, young adults, women and elderly living their lives in Villa Progreso. I learned that most of the middle-age men and some women have migrated out to the U.S or to cities such as Queretaro or Mexico City—and as far as New York—in search of increasing their income earnings potential and better life. I asked myself, why seek a better life given the fact that the community was tranquil, attractive, and after all a safe place to live? As I became acquainted with Villa Progreso its people and lifestyle, it seemed to me like a great place to live. The physical environment offered a sense of peace and proximity to nature. Moreover, the people were always kind, loving, and respectful with me. As my stay prolonged, the economic reasons underneath many of the aspects of the social, cultural and economic life of the community began to be visible to me. It became obvious, for example, that people migrated because of the near subsistence-level of the economic situation in which most people find themselves immersed in as an agricultural producers and craft making people. Most people in Villa Progreso engage in a hard labor. They work the land and grow crops for to meet their nutritional needs or they work the *ixtle* fiber, a vegetable natural

fiber extracted from the agave plant locally known as *maguey*. In many households, mostly women and children, but some older men (the ones who have not migrated) as well, work this fiber day after day. They transform the fiber into long cords that are then made into a variety of articles like lames, watches, table runners, flower vases, representations of the Virgin of Guadalupe, belts, bags. This work does not pay much and even though there are other sources of income in the community such as jobs at a broom factory and a ceramic shop, the jobs there do not pay much. In this context, people of Villa Progreso are forced to join the mobile labor force of the world of migration. Almost every household has one or more of their family members in the local cities and far north in the U.S.

I fell in love with Villa Progreso even before going there. In the mornings and in the evenings of the weekdays, which are the busy hours, the taxi drivers role their cars with a smile on their faces as they pass by with their cars full of people and greet you.

Case Studies

While in Villa Progreso, I researched the elderly, their culture, their lifestyle, their family and their community. I lived with an elderly couple during my stay in the community. Noticing differences in the material environment gave me a sense of what were some of the challenges the elderly in Villa Progreso are confronted with in their daily lives. The need for transportation was obvious. Many of the elderly have to walk to different places to fulfill their needs, sometimes several for miles on end. Unlike in the privileged environments in the US, they have no *Lifeline* or specialized vehicles for the

disabled. As a counterpart, I believe that the elderly in Villa are in great physical resilience and strength, as they are able to walk for long distances and then continue with their daily lives. I was impressed by the amount of walking and exercise the elderly people engage in. To see them walk, and sometimes faster than me (a sedentary young college student), made me think of the elderly whom I as a caregiver in my part time job as I attend college in the U.S. The people I cared for need me to drive them a few blocks away. That showed me how much energy and strength to keep on living their lives did the elderly of Villa Progreso have. The elderly themselves introduced to me their household environment by inviting me over to their homes.

Living with Antonio and Verónica Aguirre helped me answer some of my questions, as well as to establish rapport with other elderly and to become a partial insider to the village.¹ They introduced me to members of *El Grupo de la Tercera Edad Demni*. The group is made up of about 140 men and women aged 55 or older who attend a two hour meeting every Tuesday at the local headquarters and community service center of the Desarrollo Integral Familiar (DIF) the agency for Integral Family Development. DIF has programs for people of all ages, including mothers and their children. It was here where I met the elderly of Villa Progreso. Due to time limitations in the field, I decided to focus on the households of three elderly members of the community; the elderly couple, my host grandparents, Antonio and Verónica, two elderly women, one elderly man. Though spending time with these elderly individuals in their house-

¹ Names intentionally changed to protect the confidentiality of informants. Note of the editor.

hold environment, and observing them in their daily activities in the home and on the street, and in the meetings of the Demni group, I was able to observe the important aspects in the support networks and the family support of the elderly.

As my impression was that the Mexican families raise their children to think of themselves “foremost and forever as a member of the family and only secondly as an individual” (Madsen 1969: 224) and take in the responsibility to fulfill the needs of the children and the elderly members of the family, I thought that I would find this true in Mexico, especially in a rural place such as Villa Progreso. I observed that many of the elderly in Villa Progreso live either by themselves, with their partner or with only the youngest of their children. I observed that the support networks of the elderly have shifted from previously encircling the family to including the community, which is the case now, and in some cases the family has excluded itself. As I mentioned before, it is rare to find a household without a family member residing in the U.S. The elderly that I observed the most were my host grandparents, Antonio and Verónica Aguirre who moved from Mexico City to Villa Progreso after retiring. They have three sons, two who live in Mexico City and one who lives next door to them, but rarely visits them:

My son lives next door to us and rarely comes to visit, less likely to see how we are doing. When he goes to the store in his car, he does not come to invite us; he only takes us when we ask him to. My other children live far

and only come to visit when they have time. It's easier for us to go visit them.² They have two daughters; one lives in Mexico City and the other one lives in New York City: *Ofelia is deft and only writes to us*, —complained Verónica to me— *but she takes her time in writing us*. They adopted three of their grandchildren, two granddaughters and one grandson. The oldest granddaughter has moved away, the grandson lives in the outskirts of Villa Progreso and they are still raising the youngest granddaughter. *We tell Reyna to go ahead and live her life and for her* —continued Verónica— *not to holdback because of us*.

They do not have any of their children or grandchildren taking care of their every day needs such as chores and cooking, even less their physical and economical needs. As you walk by Villa Progreso it is hard not to see Antonio and Verónica holding hands walking up the hill into the main street. Were ever they go they go together, they look like lovebirds: *They call us the couple of Mexico* says Verónica. They divide the household chores; Antonio cleans the house, waters the plants, takes the garbage out and hangs the clothes. Verónica does the cooking, she washes the dishes, and does the laundry. She also decorates the house, and, as household chores pop up, they both take time to make sure they get it done. I saw them work together and consult each other about almost everything. They do their grocery shopping in San Juan Del Rio, a city

² *Mi hijo vive a lado de nosotros y casi nunca viene a visitarnos, mucho menos a ver como estamos. Cuando va al Mercado en su coche, no pasa para invitarnos, solo los lleva cuando se lo pedimos. Mis otros hijos viven lejos y solamente vienen a visitarnos cuando tienen tiempo. Es mas facil de nosotros vallamos a visitarlos a ellos.* Interview with Verónica Aguirre, Summer 2002.

about two hours away from Villa Progreso, at a discount store for government employees and former employees (both of them are former government employees) named ISSSTE.³ They usually go there once a month and bulk up on things they need. If they ever need anything during the month they go to Ezequiel Montes to buy whatever it is they need.

They are both retired so they receive a pension, which helps them pay their bills and enjoy life. They also sold their house in Mexico City, which allows them to have extra spending money. They like to travel and try to take a vacation once a year. Since they have family in Mexico City, Toluca and in Michoacán they take short trips during the year to visit with their relatives. While I was there we traveled to Michuacan, which is about six hours away from Villa Progreso, to visit Antonio's relatives and to attend a wedding of a goddaughter. After spending a month and a half with them I was able to conclude that they do not rely on any particular family member to take care of their needs, they are very independent and like to socialize very much. They like to visit others in need and reach out to anyone who needs a hand. They were some of the first members of the elderly association and have encouraged others to attend. They understand that elderly people feel the need for a community and by attending their weekly meetings at "El DIF" they can socialize and receive the support of the community and other elderly.

I also observed and learned more about the life of a widower who is also a

member of the elderly association. Leticia (Leti) Martinez Vigil is an elderly woman, born on September the fifth of 1923 and just turned 79 years old. She was born on a small nearby village (*ranchito*) named "El Carbonal", when she got married she moved to another village on the outskirts of Villa Progreso named *Los Ramirez*. She was only 15 years old when she first married. Her husband died after being married for five years. By the age of 23 she married again to a man who was 40 at the time. When she married for the second time, she moved to Villa Progreso. The village of *Los Ramirez* was far from Villa Progreso where her new husband worked. Her first husband died leaving her with one daughter. Her second husband later abandoned her, leaving her with another daughter and two sons. One of her sons died after getting married, his family lives in San Juan Del Rio and rarely visits Leti. Leti lives by herself, none of her relatives provide her with support on her daily life, though her oldest daughter helps her economically: *I live here by myself, —says Leti— my cat use to be my companionship, but she died two days ago.* Leti's oldest daughter, Jovita lives in Mexico City. When young, Jovita's husband died and left her with two sons, with no other choice Leti advised her to leave her children with her and to go work in the city. Jovita, doing just that left to Mexico City and has lived there since. She visits Leti about once every three months and sometimes even longer than that. The two boys grew up and soon migrated to the U.S leaving Leti by herself. Her other daughter, Helena lives a few houses down from Leti; she visits her about every three days. Leti's other son, Arturo, is sick and is not able to visit her because of his diabetes. *There's a lot of family members but what good*

³ ISSSTE Instituto del Seguro Social al Servicio de los Trabajadores del Estado. Social Security Institute to the Service of the Mexican State Workers.

does it do if I do not have anything shared Leticia with me. Leti wakes up early each morning, by seven in the morning she is showered, dressed and at church playing the roll of the lead singer. Leti comes home and eats breakfast at around nine in the morning. She will then do some household chores and prepares her lunch. She likes to eat soups and “nopales”; she eats lunch at four in the afternoon. She spends most of the afternoon and evening watching *novelas* soap operas such as “Juego de la Vida” and “Complices de Amor”, Leti’s day ends at about ten or ten thirty at night. Her favorite hobby is to care for her garden. After visiting Leti and observing her lifestyle I conclude that she is in the need for someone to provide her with company, her health is not to the point where she is categorized as disabled. Leti has arthritis and high blood pressure, she also has problems with her sugar levels and takes two pills everyday to regulate her blood pressure and her sugar level. On Tuesday afternoons. Leti walks a few blocks down to the plaza and takes a taxi to the Department of Family Services, known locally as *DIF*. While there she chats away most of the two hours, she gets to spend with other elderly. She was also one of the first members to attend the weekly meetings. By attending these meetings, Leti fulfills the need of human contact.

While in Villa Progreso, I met another elder man who lives all by himself. He is also a member of the elderly association at the program *DIF*. He has regularly attended meetings for about two years now. His name is José María Resendiz. He has a large family, composed of daughters and sons, grandchildren and great-grandchildren. His entire family has turned their backs on him and has left him to live by himself in a tiny

brick shack with no electricity, bathroom, kitchen, food, clothes and love: *My children do not love me, they don’t even give me a taco*. José María is in good health, he still manages to work a little around his neighborhood for some money to buy food. He was encouraged to go to the *DIF* by his ex-brother-in-law who told him that by going to the meetings he would have a pleasant time and enjoy some company.

As time went by, I was able to observe many other of the elders of the community, some of whom live alone and do not have anyone around to at least provide some companionship. Many of the families in Villa Progreso have left their elders without support.

This experience with elders leaving on their own in Mexico has had a major impact on me. I live with my grandmother and I try to help her out in any possible way. I take her grocery shopping, we go to doctor appointments together, I run errands for her, I take her to visit relatives and we even spend some afternoon playing *loteria* together. Her meals are all made for her, someone always does the household chores and I am happy to see that my grandmother has more than enough company.

Conclusion

As I deeply observed the daily routines and lifestyles of elders in Villa Progreso it became apparent the family support networks among the elderly are changing (basically disappearing) and the community as a whole is only giving whatever support it can be provided institutionally to the elderly. The void left by the family immersed in migratory cycle is being covered by activities of the elders themselves create as members of the *Demni* association. I believe that in

rural places like Villa Progreso, globalization and consumerism has generated a human cost at local levels that has been largely overseen in research. A phenomenon—the gradual disappearing of traditional networks of family support—is greatly changing the Mexican cultural landscape. As it is occurring in the US, Hispanic families are no longer providing the assistance it has been believed they provide (Dietz 1995; Hogan, Eggebeen & Clogg 1993; Lacayo 1980, 1992). Similarly, as several studies suggest, there is a difference that exists between ideal values and actual behaviors in the care of the elderly (Hanson, Sauer & Seelbach 1983; Markides, Martin & Gomez 1983). Other studies by Maldonado (1985) and Hogan, Eggebeen & Clogg (1993) also suggest that in the US the provision care to aging rela-

tives is becoming more difficult as more young Mexican American couples work outside the home, experience upward mobility and move out of the neighborhoods where older family members remain (Roberts, Resendiz & De Vargas 1997). To my surprise, this is the same situation that I found is happening in rural Mexico today.

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